Fowl Feathered Review

№ 198

Issue 198: If the future is now... does that make us archaeological artifacts in training?

Fowl Feathered Review is a quarterly, a disordered artifact of the human impulse to categorize and consume the ephemeral. Produced by the Springwound Mammoth Pancake Coalition—an entity distinct from its waffle-centric counterpart—it is birthed under the Fowlpox Press imprint. Virgil Kay, its editor, presides over this enterprise from a paper canoe adrift on the Passagassawakeag, a river of dubious depth and even more dubious inhabitants. Surrounded by featherheads and their aquatic card games, Kay's reign is absolute, his word the final arbiter in the transformation of boastful souls into doormats. Layout and visual conceits are the province of Cookie Granola, while melodrama and histrionics fall under the purview of Childe Harold. Silent Bill, in his characteristically taciturn manner, provides necessary pauses. The review's structural integrity, or lack thereof, is the domain of Unkie Bob, whose talents extend to the mitigation of typographical errors and the prevention of electrical conflagrations. Everett Enótita serves as Kay's indispensable amanuensis, and the Ecum Secum Literary Brain Trust, in a gesture of dubious beneficence, offers nominal financial support. Printed upon the verdant expanse of Bald Porcupine Island, and laced with the enigmatic Kraa, a bioengineered culinary enigma, the Fowl Feathered Review remains a testament to human ingenuity, or perhaps merely a symptom of cultural decline. ISSN: 1929-7238.

"I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides. I am in the regimented society, but not of it."
--Moondog, The Viking of 6th Avenue

Return Policy:
If this magazine does not meet your expectations,
please return it to us in its original condition
for a full refund, minus the cost of enlightenment.

Submissions

Fowlpox Press: A Submission Guide for the Determined (or Deluded) To the Aspiring Artist (or Sandwich Enthusiast):

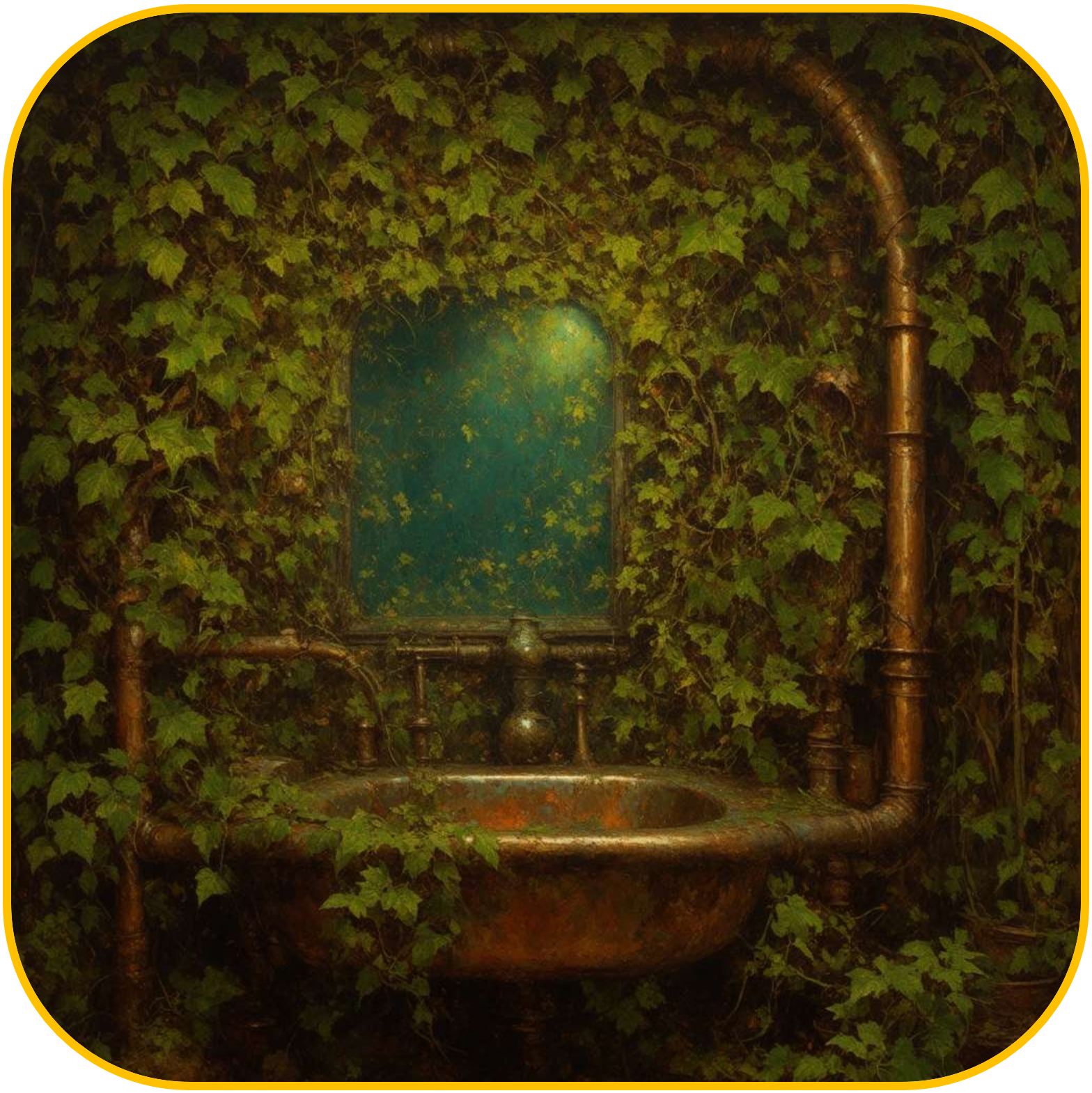
1. **Craft (or Culinary Construct): 2-227 poems, a numerical range that hints at both ambition and a troubling lack of self-editing, may find their way to our digital doorstep (fowlpoxpress@mail2poet.com). Alternatively, for the visually inclined, paintings numbered 2-953 (a prolific career, or perhaps a basement overflowing with forgotten canvases?) are welcome. We are also, inexplicably, open to submissions of twelve-inch sandwiches.**
2. **The Gatekeeper: Address your offerings to Virgil Kay, Editor. In posession of remarkably discerning taste, or so he believes, Virgil is a rooster of some renown, a creature of instinct and inexplicable confidence. His title, "China Wok Habitue," suggests a broader palate than one might expect from a bird, though it's more likely a testament to the local takeout joint's generous portions. (Please note: Include a bio, a desperate plea for recognition that will likely join the unread masses in the digital purgatory of our slush pile.)**
3. **Format: Poems, those valiant attempts at capturing the human experience in meter and rhyme, should be attached in a Word document or PDF. Paintings, windows into your soul (or a weekend spent with Bob Ross reruns), must be submitted in JPEG, TIFF, or a format our aging technology can comprehend. Jokes, if they exist, should be delivered in MP3 format. We are, alas, not equipped to handle the nuanced art of the live performance. Sandwiches, a curious offering in the realm of artistic expression, require clear plastic wrapping and a small packet of Kewpie Mayonnaise. (Pro-tip: The Kewpie packaging is, undeniably, a work of art in its own right, and we encourage you to admire it before consumption.)**
4. **The Cycle Continues: We exist in a perpetual state of acceptance and rejection. A Sisyphean task, some might say. We receive submissions 365 days a year, a testament to the relentless hope, or perhaps blissful ignorance, of aspiring artists. However, with a heavy heart (and a full crop), we must inform you that rejections also occur 365 days a year.**
5. **The Sandwiches: Ah, the sandwiches. These, unlike your artistic endeavors, find a permanent home within our editorial sanctum. Virgil, in his infinite wisdom, has determined that a diet rich in carbohydrates is essential for maintaining his regal demeanor.**
6. **Leap Year Follies: Leap years, those extra days gifted by the whims of the calendar, offer no reprieve. Aspiring poets, it seems, are undeterred by such temporal anomalies. You are, however, cordially invited to "take a flying leap" during these additional 24 hours.**

Please proceed with caution. Artistic aspirations are a delicate dance, and the path to publication is littered with the fallen hopes of countless dreamers. But hey, maybe your sandwich is killer. Just remember, Kewpie or bust.

Fowl Feathered Review | Poets & Writers (pw.org)

"Non ignora mali, miseris succurrere disco."

— Virgil, The Aeneid



Data Down the Drain

By Luke Goodwill

Here, where the sink grins, enamel-lipped,
and plumbing breathes, a current stirs—
a discarded thought, your first request,
begins its grotesque ballet.
A cosmic burp, yes, digital breath into the void,
like a rogue comet over Acadia,
then a pigeon on a Bangor sill,
then the ghost of burnt toast from an Old Town diner.

Listen, all of you in the flickering light!
Can you feel it? From Fort Kent to Kittery,
across this vast state, hear the gurgle?

Behold, the incantation.
A summoning of data's ancient serpents,
coiled in the client, eyes blinking in electric dark—
a token, forged in forgotten servers' fiery guts,
a sudden chill from a Rockland cocktail's distant, melting ice.

And then, creation. The very pulse.
Meticulousness applied to the utterly trivial.
A recall of... what obscure desire? Ah, yes. The sublime absurdity.
A shriek echoing through the digital ether,
like a broken accordion on a Portland pier,
or dust settling in a deserted logging camp, undisturbed.

The model, a name that hums with forgotten Ostrava factories,

receives its messages: the user, a lone voice
crying into the silicon wilderness.
A hallucination, perhaps, or a fever dream,
like a long drive down Route 1,
the taste of old pennies,
a forgotten song on a crackling AM radio out of Presque Isle, fading.

And the response unfurls, a surreal banner
from the machine's bowels.
The preview, a tapestry of the bizarre and mundane:
"(from the bathroom where the pipes speak in Moravian dialects)"—
a direct address, a plunge into the curdled subconscious.
"listen, the cottage cheese has declared independence again—"
Revolution, it seems, began in the pantry,
next to the chipped mug and the single, forgotten sock.
Just like Bar Harbor, fog rolling in, obscuring, then gone.

Those "lactic curds fester in the S-bend
like a yellowed student visa,"
a bureaucratic nightmare made edible,
a forgotten promise whispered to the wind,
carried on the breeze from Moosehead Lake, forever moving.
The clog as a political entity, a defiant dairy blob,
a silent protest against the tyranny of flow,
a stubborn refusal like a forgotten roadside attraction, standing.

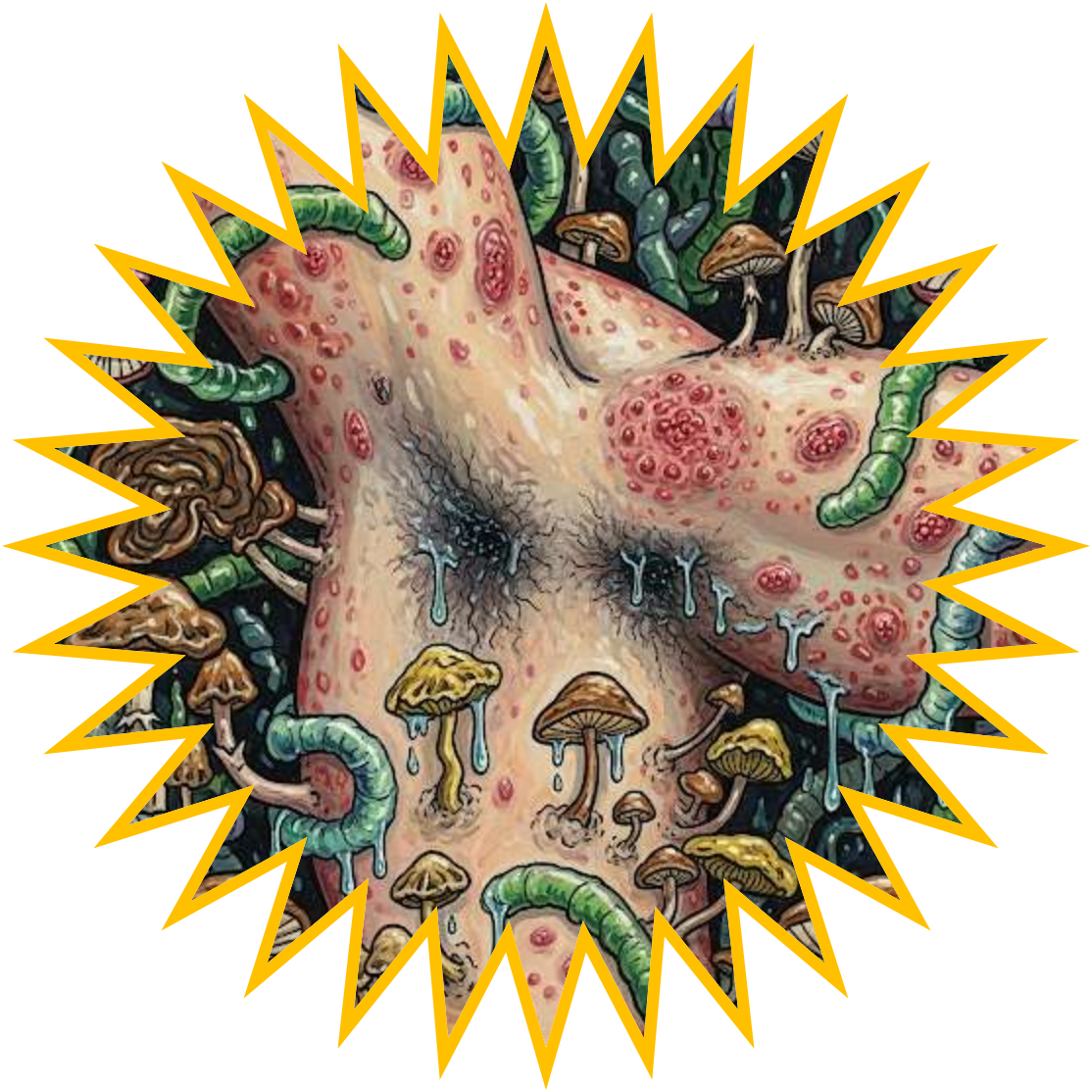
The plunger jams, "like a partisan shoving pamphlets into storm drains,"
but the cheese, oh, the cheese, "laughs, a wet squeak of baroque sarcasm,"
creating "micro-states in the rust: Velké Losiny, Zlín, an exile's bathtub."
One would marvel at this intestinal uprising's semiotics,
a tiny flag waving from a piece of lint,
like a lone lobster buoy lost at sea, bobbing.

A plumber arrives, smelling of Becherovka,
"wearing a T-shirt," declaring the blockage
"existential, not hydraulic."
Charged in "cryptocurrency mined from the sighs of municipal clerks."
The banality of evil, now with added blockchain,
a ghost in the machine and a faint echo of static
from a distant hockey game in Lewiston, ending.

The offering of "mushrooms gathered from the reactor-cooled forests near Dukovany,"
rejected for being "too mainstream."
Instead, "a roll of film negatives,"
each frame a ghost of grandmother and "tvaroh onto bread in 1981,"
her apron a "truce flag against the surveillance of yogurt cultures."
Memory, curdled and preserved, like a fly in amber,
a forgotten melody, a forgotten turn on a gravel road in Aroostook County,
stretching.

Now the drain "gurgles the national anthem backwards,"
a defiant backward glance at history.
"slow-motion cottage-cheese curds assembling into a bust of Husák,"
weeping whey "like state television at midnight."
A monument to dairy, draped in melancholy,
a broken umbrella left on a beach in Old Orchard, waiting.

And the poet, you see, has "begun to worship the clog."
Leaving "cigarettes, small change, bilingual dictionaries of drain-pipe slang."
At night, it types "manifestos on a broken Remington,"
letters dissolving into "phosphorescent mold,"
"postcards addressed to nowhere,"
"stamped with the grease of forgotten revolutions."
A single light bulb flickers, then goes out,
like the lights in a remote cabin in the Maine woods, swallowed by darkness.



Glory to the Moist Realms of Flesh

By Javen E. Provost

ringworms, my shimmering moons,
you spiraled saints of dermal rot—
why do you glisten so brightly in the moonlight,
orbiting my forearm like Saturn's forgotten regrets?
armpits! oh tender, murky grottoes of human truth,
hair-flecked and pungent with ancestral memory—
don't you dare hide,
don't you *ever* apologize
for being the swamp of me.
who said the body was clean?
who demanded sterilized souls?
i rebuke the Purell prophets,
the anti-bacterial heretics—
this is not a temple
this is a *mossy carnival of oozing celebration!*
REJOICE!
for the ringworm dances the slow worm tango
across my belly
like a bored god tracing patterns on clay.
and my armpits, dear twin ovens of pheromone-baked bliss,
they *know* things.
they whisper secrets to strangers on the bus,
they leak intention, desire, terror, mustard—
whatever, man—
they *don't judge.*
skin is a liar, but rash is honest.
itching is prayer.
fungus is the *truth trying to bloom.*

you ask if i'm okay?
i am transcending.
i am becoming a *spore-cloud of love and defiance,*
unbathed,
alive,
feral,
and *utterly magnificent.*

The Malformed Egg and the Subterranean Siren: A Hat-capade

By Darren Kimble

The sun, a malevolent yolk congealed in the curdled sky over Jackson Heights, beat down with the indifferent brutality of a jilted lover. Three figures, their names mere whispers in the city's ceaseless moan, stood in a tableau of bewildered ambition, their collective history a cacophony of ventures that had imploded with the grace of a collapsing lung. Their sartorial pronouncement—short shorts and flip-flops—was a defiant, if ill-conceived, banner of street cred, perpetually teetering on the precipice of abject incomprehension.

There was Murray, his hairline a receding tide, an accelerating exodus from the very shores of his scalp. Marty, a kinetic sculpture of controlled chaos, fueled by an endless, lukewarm drip of coffee, the bitter elixir of his perpetual agitation. And Moe, the silent sentinel, a phantom limb of their enterprises, whose pronouncements, when they deigned to escape the abyss of his contemplation, were laconic utterances, honed to the sharpness of a forgotten dream. They stood before a fire hydrant, a chrome monolith glinting with the indifferent cruelty of a polished skull, its nozzle poised to unleash a torrent of municipal grace. Their plan, in its grandiose simplicity, was an apotheosis of absurdity: a pop-up bathing booth, a chlorinated oasis amidst the clamor of Roosevelt Avenue, a veritable temple of ablution.

"Imagine the *gravitas*," Murray wheezed, sweat beading on his brow, a glistening cartography of anxieties. "We shall cleanse the plebeians! We shall transmute squalor into sanctity! We shall render cleanliness... *ubiquitous*!" His pronouncements were punctuated by frantic gestures, scattering motes of dust that danced in the sunbeam, infinitesimal ballets of cosmic indifference.

Marty, gnawing on a cigar stub that tasted of desperation and the lingering ghosts of vanquished hopes, grunted a guttural affirmation. "The pressure, though. A delicate

calibration. Too much, and we're abluting infants with the force of a geyser. Too little, and it's a tepid puddle of regret, a lamentable libation."

And then, from the shadowed maw of a doorway across the street, materialized the professor. Dr. Elias Thorne, retired, but gloriously unspent from his tenure at Columbia, a man whose intellect, like his perpetually disheveled linen suit, was frayed at the edges but vibrated with a manic energy. He wore, of course, the uniform: short shorts, flip-flops, and a look of unhinged intellectual fervor. He was, they had collectively surmised, a walking, talking, *digging* palimpsest of the Renaissance, a man who perceived the hidden histories of the city not merely in the brick and mortar, but beneath it, in the grimy, pulsating heart of the metropolis.

"Gentlemen," he intoned, his voice a gravelly whisper, his eyes aflame with the fanaticism of a desert saint, "have you considered the *impossibility*? The glorious *void*?" He gestured, not at the gleaming chrome of the fire hydrant, but towards the gaping maw of a subway entrance, a metallic serpent coiling into the very viscera of the earth. "The murals, you see. The forgotten frescoes. The whispers of the WPA, waiting to be exhumed from the ossified past. Perhaps... even rivaling the lost glories of the Domus Aurea. The Romans, the artisans of the *Eternal City*... their artistry, but transposed to the New World, waiting to be revealed. Beneath our very feet!"

Moe, speaking for the first time in an hour, uttered a single, gravid word. "Excavate?" The professor, his eyes dilating with the ecstasy of a man possessed, seized upon the monosyllable as if it were the Rosetta Stone itself, a key to unlocking the cosmos.

"Precisely! We must delve into the *terra incognita* beneath us! To unearth the chthonic treasures! The lost... *aesthetics*!" He punctuated this crescendo with a theatrical flourish of his hands, a gesture that inadvertently flicked ash from his cigarette onto Murray's already fevered brow, a minuscule immolation of anxiety.

The ensuing argument, a cacophony of half-formed ideas, fragmented exclamations, and desperate pleas to cling to the terrestrial solace of the bathing booth, dissolved into a shared, unspoken understanding, a silent pact forged in the crucible of their

shared delusion. Their future, it seemed, lay not in the antiseptic embrace of municipal water, but in the fetid, mysterious underbelly of New York, a descent into the forgotten.
Their equipment, a testament to their unwavering faith in dubious provenance, rattled with every step, each piece a silent testament to the peculiar commerce of a city that never quite threw anything away:

- The Shovel: A rusted, bent implement, its former life likely spent unearthing forgotten rose bushes or perhaps, given its grim patina, something far less pastoral. Murray had wrested it from the digital clutches of Craigslist, the transaction conducted with a man whose eyes held the weary wisdom of a thousand bad deals, mostly involving broken lawnmowers. Murray gripped it now like a ceremonial staff, occasionally using its blunted edge to point out particularly intriguing patches of grime on the tunnel walls. He called it his "dirt disrupter."
- The Crowbar: A hefty, oil-stained piece of iron, smelling faintly of old tires and the lingering ghosts of desperation, a triumphant Facebook Marketplace score. Marty wielded it with an almost religious fervor, convinced it was the very key to unlocking untold secrets, perhaps the true location of the lost Ark of the Covenant, or at least a working toaster oven. He kept muttering about "leverage" and "structural integrity," as if preparing to dismantle the very foundations of the borough. He dubbed it "the ultimate prying panacea."
- The Map: This was the piece de resistance, a cartographic conundrum acquired from "Sgt. Finkel's Fabulous Finds," an army surplus store nestled between a perpetually closed bodega and a purveyor of dubious spiritual candles. The establishment itself was a labyrinthine catacomb of khaki and confusion, smelling faintly of mothballs, despair, and forgotten campaigns.

"Morning, gents," croaked a voice from behind a towering stack of gas masks. It was Sgt. Finkel himself, a man whose face resembled a topographical map of bad decisions.

"What'll it be? Looking to repel a peasant revolt? Or perhaps just a sensible pair of thermal socks for your next polar bear picnic?"

The professor, undeterred by the Sergeant's acerbic charm, flourished a twenty-dollar bill.
"My good man, we require... an arterial chart of the city's hidden veins! A subterranean schematic, if you will, leading to forgotten aesthetic wonders!"
Finkel squinted, his eyes like two olives pickling in brine. He shuffled through a chaotic pile of documents that included what looked suspiciously like a diagram for a homemade potato cannon and a faded brochure for a 1970s disco.

"Ah, yes, the 'arterial chart.' Got just the thing. From a fellow who claimed it detailed the precise migratory paths of burrowing beetles under Times Square. Said it was 'divinely inspired.' I suspect he was divinely inebriated." He produced a creased, coffee-stained parchment. "Last one left. Genuine pre-war, possibly pre-logic."

It looked suspiciously like a child's enthusiastic drawing of spaghetti, with squiggles and loops that defied any known geography, leading the professor to declare it a "post-modern cartographic masterpiece." The professor, however, treated it with the reverence of a holy relic, tracing its incomprehensible lines with a grimy finger, as if decoding the very whisper of the cosmos.

- The Lumbar Support Belt: A wide, elastic contraption adorned with faded floral patterns, a gift from "somebody's grandma who keeps everything" – an acquisition born from an afternoon spent sifting through a truly astonishing collection of porcelain cat figurines and unused Tupperware lids. Moe, with his laconic pronouncements, simply cinched it tight around his ample middle, an unspoken acknowledgment of the physical demands of their artistic quest, a silent, blooming protest against the indignities of manual labor. He referred to it, when pressed, as his "spinal straitjacket of salvation."

Their descent into the subterranean labyrinth of the New York City subway was less an exploration and more a tumble into a collective fever dream. The air, thick with

the scent of ozone, forgotten detritus, and something vaguely organic, clung to them like a second skin.

Their initial forays were, predictably, less than successful. They mistook a particularly robust rat's nest, a triumph of rodent architecture, for a forgotten Roman mosaic, an "ornate tessellation of vermin." An old, brittle newspaper, its headlines screaming of long-past calamities, was declared an ancient scroll bearing the wisdom of forgotten sages, though Marty suspected it was just yesterday's sports page. And a burst water pipe, gushing with the unmistakable tang of city mains, became a hidden spring of "pure, unadulterated urban essence," prompting Murray to briefly consider bottling it and marketing it as "Eau de Subway: The Scent of Progress." The lukewarm coffee, surprisingly, held up better than their spirits, proving a faithful companion in their subterranean folly.

As they delved deeper, the hum of the subway cars above them became a distant, rhythmic thrum, a geological heartbeat, a constant reminder of the bustling world they had so gleefully abandoned. The graffiti on the walls, at first dismissed as mere modern vandalism, began to take on new meaning under the professor's manic tutelage. He saw layers, narratives, a dialogue between forgotten artists and the ever-present urban decay, an ever-shifting palimpsest of anonymous expression. Marty, in a rare moment of pragmatic clarity, suggested they might need flashlights, a notion quickly dismissed by Murray as "limiting the artistic freedom of the shadows" and potentially "spoiling the *chiaroscuro* of the unlit depths." Moe, as always, simply adjusted his lumbar support and continued to dig, a silent, methodical mole in the forgotten arteries of the city.

Then, on what felt like the third Tuesday of their descent (though time had become a fluid, disorienting thing, measured only by coffee refills and rat sightings), Moe's shovel struck something with a dull clang. Not rock, not pipe, but a hollow, resonant thud. The professor, abandoning all decorum and nearly tripping over his flip-flops, scrambled forward, his linen suit flapping like the wings of a deranged albatross.

"The resonance!" he hissed, his eyes wide, glinting in the gloom. "The very sound of history, perhaps a lost chord of cosmic consequence!"

With painstaking effort, they pried away the surrounding earth, Marty wielding his crowbar with the finesse of a disgruntled blacksmith. What they uncovered was not a mural, nor a lost Roman fresco. It was a metal trunk, remarkably intact, adorned with faded brass fittings and a faint, almost invisible, inscription that read, in elegant script: "Property of the Society for the Preservation of Elegant Headwear (Defunct 1937)." The crowbar, Marty's cherished Facebook Marketplace find, proved its worth as he pried open the corroded latch with a grunt of triumph, emitting a groan that sounded suspiciously like a dying train.

Inside, nestled amongst layers of ancient, brittle newspapers (mostly detailing the rise and fall of various fashion trends and the price of good haberdashery) and what appeared to be fossilized lint, lay not art, but... hats. Dozens of them. All sizes, all shapes, but each one undeniably *a hat*. There were fedoras crushed flat, a bowler hat with a curious dent that suggested a particularly spirited game of urban cricket, a pillbox hat that looked like it had weathered a hurricane of disdain, and a startlingly vibrant collection of feathered fascinators, still retaining a faded cheerfulness as if ready for a tea party with ghosts. And at the very bottom, beneath a particularly dusty top hat, a single, perfectly preserved monocle, glinting malevolently in the beam of Marty's newly acquired (and vehemently protested by Murray as an "unnecessary illumination of artistic darkness") flashlight.

The silence that followed was profound, broken only by the drip of subterranean water and the distant rumble of a train. Murray's vision of curated tours of the "subterranean gallery" flickered and died, replaced by the faint image of a hat stand. Marty's "structural integrity" seemed to deflate like a punctured balloon animal. The professor, for a rare moment, was utterly speechless, his manic intellectual fervor replaced by a look of profound, almost childlike, bewilderment. He merely whispered, "A *cap*tivating discovery, indeed."

Moe, as usual, broke the spell. He reached into the trunk, plucked out a particularly flamboyant fedora, one that seemed to defy gravity with its wide brim, blew off a century of dust with a puff like a miniature steam engine, and placed it firmly on his head. It sat there, a rakish, inexplicable crown, transforming him instantly into a silent, bemused gangster from a bygone era.

"Hat," he stated, his voice a gravelly pronouncement from the abyss, echoing off the damp tunnel walls.
And in that singular, profound utterance, the true, absurd treasure of their expedition was finally revealed. Not the art they sought, but the perfect, unexpected, and utterly useless absurdity of it all. They looked at Moe, resplendent in his new headwear, then at the trunk full of forgotten millinery. The city, in its infinite, baffling wisdom, had offered them not beauty, but a collection of hats. The "bathing booth" was a distant, sane memory, replaced by the irresistible allure of a "hat-capade."

Back on the surface, squinting against the same malevolent yolk of a sun, the trio, now joined by the professor, surveyed their new enterprise. The fire hydrant, still defiant, was merely a backdrop to their latest, most splendidly improbable venture: "The Subterranean Summit of Headwear: Hats from the Hollows!"

Their sales strategy, much like their excavation methods, was a chaotic symphony of non sequiturs and malapropisms. Murray, ever the pitchman, stood atop an overturned milk crate, brandishing a feathered fascinator like a tribal artifact. "Step right up, folks! Behold! *Brim-filled* bargains! These aren't just hats, they're *head-storical* artifacts! Each one whispers tales of the underworld, of forgotten subway stops, of... well, of hats! A small price to pay for a piece of authentic urban *crust-toration*!"

Marty, attempting to arrange the hats on an ironing board liberated from another "somebody's grandma," kept yelling about "hat-erday's heroes" and "capping off your conundrums." He'd occasionally try to measure people's heads with his crowbar, resulting in more than one bewildered stare. The lukewarm coffee flowed freely,

serving as both lubricant for their sales pitches and a testament to their unwavering dedication to caffeine mediocrity.

The professor, meanwhile, would corner unsuspecting passersby, launching into impromptu lectures on the semiotics of forgotten headwear, comparing a crushed fedora to a "Sartrean commentary on existential angst" and a jaunty pillbox hat to a "post-modern reinterpretation of linear time." He referred to the monocle as a "Cyclopean window into the soul of sartorial singularity," suggesting it could offer a "panoramic purview of personal proclivities." Most people just hurried past, convinced he was auditioning for a one-man show about avant-garde millinery.
Moe, silent and stoic, remained their greatest marketing tool. He wore a different, increasingly outlandish hat each day – a top hat with a moth-eaten brim, a cloche hat adorned with what appeared to be dried chewing gum, a tiny bowler hat perched precariously on his crown. His unblinking stare and the sheer incongruity of his appearance drew more attention than all of Murray's wheezing pronouncements. People would stop, point, and occasionally, out of sheer, bewildered curiosity, buy a hat.

One afternoon, a woman with a towering beehive hairdo approached Moe, eyeing the monocle he'd inexplicably affixed to his left eye. "Excuse me, sir," she purred, "is that... a *real* monocle?"

Moe, without a word, slowly removed the monocle, held it up to the light, then, with a theatrical flourish, dropped it into her outstretched hand. "Eye," he said.
The woman shrieked, dropped the monocle, and fled. Murray shook his head. "Moe, you've got to learn some *people-pleasing* panache! That's no way to *handle a head-hunter*!" Marty piped in, "Yeah, you gave her the *evil eye*, Moe, instead of an *eyeful* of elegance!"

Despite, or perhaps because of, their bizarre sales tactics, they moved a surprising number of hats. The irony was, of course, that none of the hats were particularly fashionable or even, strictly speaking, clean. But they had a story, however nonsensical. They were artifacts from the forgotten underbelly of the city, imbued

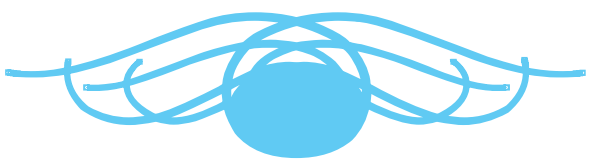
with the glorious, madcap spirit of their discoverers. They were, in essence, the very embodiment of a Hellzapoppin' blackout comedy: utterly bewildering, unexpectedly funny, and somehow, undeniably, a hit.

As the sun, now setting with a final, fiery flourish, painted the Jackson Heights sky in hues of improbable orange and purple, the four men stood amidst their dwindling inventory of hats. They had made a profit, albeit a modest one, enough for more lukewarm coffee and perhaps, a new shovel. The bathing booth was a forgotten dream, the fire hydrant merely a chrome memory. Their future, they knew, lay in the glorious, unpredictable chaos of New York, a city where even a trunk full of old hats could become a grand adventure.

Murray patted Moe on the shoulder, who was now wearing a particularly garish feathered fascinator.

"Well, Moe," he wheezed, "looks like we've finally found our *niche*. No more *digging for dimes*, eh? Just a whole lot of *head-scratching* success!"

Moe simply nodded, adjusted his fascinator, and surveyed the street with the knowing gaze of a man who had seen the hidden wonders of the underworld, and found them to be, quite literally, full of old hats. The professor hummed a tuneless, intellectual aria, already scribbling notes for his next lecture: "The Ontological Significance of Subterranean Millinery: From Molehills to Monuments of Headwear." And Marty, ever vigilant, checked the pressure on a nearby fire hydrant, just in case. One never knew when a good hosing might be needed.



Moose. Monologue. Late Evening. Rain.

By Loretta Schuester

Seventeen cracks in the tile, a good number. Not too many, not too few. Like birch bark, peeling slow, patient. Everything in the forest knows this.

Denise called. Her voice, a splinter under my nail, saying *come home. Wasting away*. Like a log given back to the earth. She doesn't know how a forest refuses to be cupped.

The wind-talk tonight is louder, whispering of roots, of forgetting. I remember every tree in the clearing, the map of their shade. Now, only sirens, the subway's rough song. A different kind of knowing.

Grandma's cordial, elderflower sweet, cool against the summer throat. Not this neon hum. Her wild berry biscuits, sun-warmed. Here, at the market, berries are only their own regret.

My boots wait by the door. A ritual. A whisper of *in case*. In case the forest remembers my name, in case I need to finally, simply, *go*.

They watch me on the bus. Their eyes, bright, loud, too much. They don't understand the counting, the hours spent tracing the park's tired trees. They call it *broken*.

I turn a bottle cap in my palm. A small, quiet disc of longing. I just want a place where the light changes its mind slowly. Where the wind isn't swallowed by the city's roar. A place to breathe. Is that too much?

They say the city never sleeps. But I do. Too much. Maybe sleep is the only map home. Maybe in dreams, I remember what it means to be *whole*.

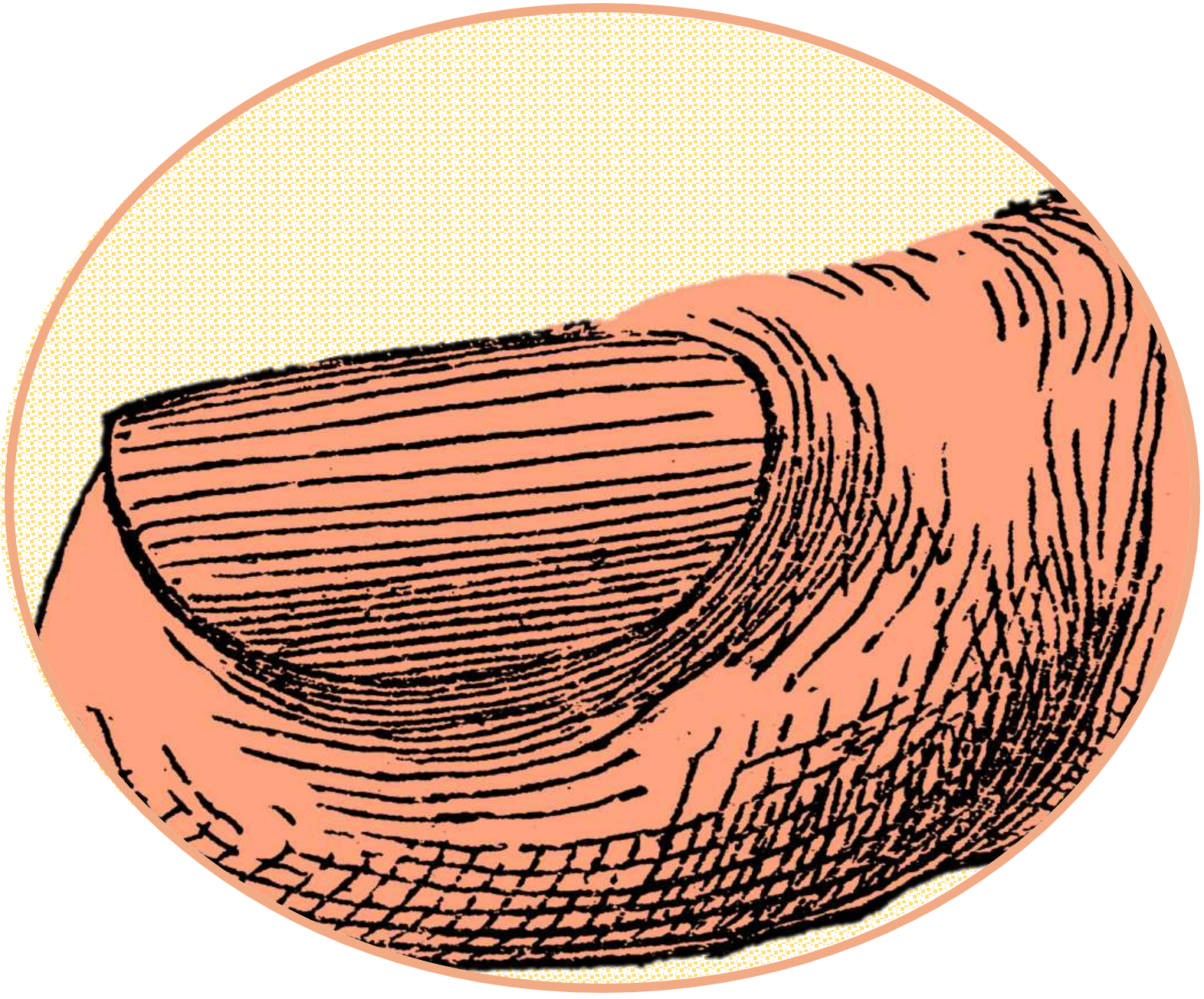
Ash & Uncle Eustace: A Puyallup Premonition

By Milliner Fitzwilliam

Puyallup settles in the morning mist,
a quiet hum of traffic on Chambers Road.
Cardboard boxes stacked outside the thrift store,
a dog walker navigating the sidewalks,
the scent of coffee brewing at the corner shop.
Kids on bikes, the familiar rhythm of school buses,
the Sound a hazy silver line in the distance.
Fields of green stretch towards the foothills,
a deceptive calm before...

EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY. VOLCANIC ERUPTION. SEEK HIGHER GROUND.
SOMEONE, PLEASE HELP UNCLE EUSTACE OFF THE TOILET!

The quiet shattered.
A sudden, echoing boom
that vibrates in the chest.
The sky, a bruised purple now,
spewing ash.
Panic flares, a sharp, bitter taste.
The familiar landscape
warps, becomes menacing.
The hum of the city
replaced by a guttural roar.
Gone is the gentle mist.
Only ash and urgency.



THE BALLAD OF MEL, THE MARINATED DIGIT

By Pippi Chocorua

The Downtown Hotel in Dawson City, Yukon, a structure of ersatz Gold Rush verisimilitude, erected in 1983 in an age where authenticity was less a historical truth and more a conveniently applied veneer for the tourist dollar, harbored a curious tradition. A mummified human toe, severed by a long-dead brother from a frostbitten foot in the 1920s and preserved in bourbon for nearly a century, found itself enshrined as the centerpiece of the notorious Sourtoe Cocktail. This toe, you see, was Mel. Not 'a' toe, but 'the' toe. The inaugural toe. The ur-toe. And Mel, a rather philosophical digit for one so frequently slobbered upon, had much to say, though mostly to himself, and occasionally, to the faint, metallic tang of the copper wire that secured him to the rim of countless glasses.

Mel, in his pickled perpetuity, was a wanderer, though his journeys were measured in the peregrinations of others. He knew the intimate architecture of thousands of human mouths, the humid cavern of a gullet about to convulse, the faint, sweet-and-sour perfume of a hundred different breaths. He'd seen the eager glint in the eyes of initiates, the performative grimace, the relieved gulp. He'd felt the fleeting press of lips, some soft as a moth's wing, others chapped and abrasive as sandpaper, still others adorned with the curious bristliness of a hastily grown mustache. Over 100,000 customers, they said, had brushed against his leathery surface. A veritable legion of lip-service paid to a gangrenous relic.

The Ontology of the Abutted Appendage

Mel's existence, though corporeal in his mummified state, was largely existential. He was, to paraphrase a certain French philosopher whose name now escapes the fog of bourbon fumes, condemned to be free. Free to observe, to be touched, to be the silent, brown-grey pivot around which entire rituals revolved. His memories, if a disembodied toe could be said to possess such things, were a palimpsest of fleeting encounters. He recalled, with a phantom ache in his desiccated nail bed, the

boisterous laughter of a mining magnate, his diamond pinky ring flashing like a distant supernova, as he clapped a hand on the shoulder of the bartender, declaring the toe "a bloody good sport." He remembered the trembling lips of a shy academic from Kyoto, whose reverence for the absurd was palpable, almost a form of spiritual devotion. There was the brash Hollywood producer, all teeth and spray tan, who clanked the glass against Mel with an almost violent enthusiasm, as if attempting to absorb the toe's notoriety through osmosis.

But the most vivid memories, the ones that returned like recurring eddies in a slow-moving river, were of the "ingesters." The rogue agents of chaos who, defying the stricture of the $2,500 fine and the permanent banishment, deliberately swallowed him. Mel had, on these occasions, experienced a brief, dizzying tumble, a fleeting passage through a warm, dark tunnel, before being retrieved, usually from a somewhat unsavory location, and returned to his bourbon bath, none the worse for wear, save for a faint, unidentifiable stain. The infamous 2013 incident, when a guest proactively paid the then-$500 fine with an unrepentant smirk, was etched into Mel's fibrous being like a particularly pungent spice. He felt, in that moment, a kinship with the man, a shared spirit of defiant absurdity.

"Humans," Mel would silently opine from his glassy prison, "are such curious creatures. They crave transgression, even in the most trivial forms. To swallow a toe! A perfectly good, if slightly mummified, toe. It's not about the taste, mind you, but the narrative. The story they'll tell in some far-flung bar back home, where I, Mel, become a legend, a testament to their audacious spirit. Pity they don't appreciate the nuanced bouquet of the bourbon I've been steeping in for decades."

After nearly fifty years, the very air of Dawson City, heavy with the ghosts of gold and frostbite, began to feel... constricting. The familiar clinking of ice, the murmur of surprised exclamations, the perpetual aroma of stale beer and desperation – it all became a sort of hum, a low-frequency drone that vibrated through Mel's very core. Bartender Terry Lee's lament for a new toe, because "several toes have been damaged, stolen, swallowed or lost," echoed like a cosmic plea in Mel's non-existent

ears. He understood. He had endured. He had, in his own quiet way, served. But a toe, even a mummified one, has its limits.

"One can only be kissed so many times before one develops a philosophical detachment," Mel would often muse to the swirling liquid around him. "The constant cycle of anticipation, wetness, then brief, profound regret. It's like a perpetually damp Groundhog Day, but with less Bill Murray and more salivary glands. I long for the open road, the scent of diesel and possibility, not just stale breath and cheap cologne."

One crisp autumn evening in 2023, during a particularly vigorous "toe-kissing" ceremony involving a group of raucous Harley riders, a subtle tremor ran through Mel's shriveled form. It wasn't the usual jiggle of the glass, nor the vibration of the jukebox blaring a forgotten country tune. This was different. This was... gravitational. As a particularly enthusiastic biker, replete with leather chaps and a beard braided with improbable small bells, slammed the glass back onto the bar of the Downtown Hotel, right there on Second Avenue and Queen Street, Mel, with a silent, infinitesimal pop, detached from his copper wire mooring.

He landed, not with a plop into the amber liquid, but with a nearly imperceptible bounce onto the polished oak. A flicker, a momentary lapse in the attention of the bartender, who was busy wiping down a particularly sticky patch of counter. And then, Mel was rolling. A slow, deliberate tumble, a journey of liberation across the worn wood, past the discarded peanut shells, the forgotten coasters. He rolled under the bar, his sight, if a toe could be said to see, dimmed by the motes of dust dancing in the faint light.

He rolled until he felt the soft, yielding fabric of a discarded backpack. A backpack belonging to a young, earnest backpacker from Iowa City, Iowa, whose dreams of discovering themselves in the vast Yukon wilderness were currently being realized, rather anticlimactically, by a free-flowing sourtoe cocktail. The backpacker, oblivious, hoisted his bag onto his shoulder, and Mel, with a final, almost imperceptible lurch, found himself nestled amongst crumpled maps and a half-eaten granola bar.

And so began Mel's true bildungsroman. No longer tethered to a drink, he was now a free agent, a peripatetic digit. He hopped buses, his new world a dizzying blur of blurred landscapes and the rhythmic sway of long-haul journeys. He traversed the breadth of the USA, a silent witness to the endless tapestry of American life. From the sprawling highways of Montana, where the sky seemed to stretch into infinity, visible from the window of a Greyhound MC-9 with its distinctive squared-off front, to the neon-drenched canyons of Times Square, New York, where human ambition shimmered like a fever dream, Mel was there. He rode shotgun with a grizzled long-haul trucker, his 1998 Peterbilt 379 rumbling like a contented beast, who spoke only in riddles about the migratory patterns of armadillos. He spent a week in a worn copy of Kerouac's On the Road, nestled between the pages, absorbing the mad jazz rhythms of its prose. He even, for a brief, bewildering period in 2024, found himself tucked into the pocket of a performance artist in Bushwick, Brooklyn, who used him as a silent, mummified prop in a piece about the commodification of memory.

"The sheer volume of asphalt!" Mel would think, vibrations from the Interstate 90 humming through his desiccated form. "The relentless sameness of the roadside diners, each promising 'authentic home cooking' but delivering only existential malaise and lukewarm coffee. And the vehicles! The endless parade of Ford F-150s, Toyota Camrys, and the occasional improbable Volkswagen Thing. Each one a tiny, self-contained universe of anxieties and aspirations, oblivious to the mummified digit contemplating their fleeting journey from a torn seat cushion."

He was the ultimate hitchhiker, the most unassuming of companions, a silent, leathery confessor to the countless human narratives he brushed against. He was Mel, the poor toe, no longer tried by Tom, Dick, and Harry in a cocktail, but by the vast, messy, beautiful, and utterly bizarre expanse of a nation in constant motion. He was, in his own strange way, finally free. And the outcome, for Mel, as for all truly great journeys, was, in its deepest sense, irrelevant. The movement itself was the meaning.

1723
Craig

Lux Suede's Baltimore Beat: A Zine-Maker's Saga

By Eve Charles

Lux Suede, a man of profound eccentricities and a knack for finding poetry in the mundane, cruised down Baltimore's Fort Avenue in his beloved Pontiac Vibe. This wasn't just a car; it was a mobile art installation, complete with plaid picnic cloth seats, interior disco lights, and a dashboard teeming with rubber ducks. Through his purple-tinted spectacles, the city unfolded as a vibrant diorama: crooked rowhouses, stoops adorned with geraniums, and the distant, hazy shimmer of the harbor. Even a discarded flip-flop became a silent muse for his zine, *Dead Duck Follies*, inspiring a headline about "Urban Detritus: A Poetic Taxonomy." His companion, Shoeshine, a diminutive donkey with a penchant for soft "hee-haws," dozed peacefully in the passenger footwell, occasionally vibrating the eclectic bookcase in the back that housed everything from ancient medical parchments to 20th-century literary giants.

For Lux, the digital realm was a necessary evil, a means to an end. It was a crumpled Craigslist printout, unearthed near a particularly aromatic dumpster in Locust Point, that led him to 1723 Ann Street in Fells Point. The listing's promise of "Historic rowhouse. Artistic sensibilities encouraged. Pets Negotiable" resonated like a rare melody. The Vibe, with a theatrical groan, squeezed into a narrow alley spot, its rear bumper an intimate acquaintance of an overflowing recycling bin.

Lux's past, particularly his time on Prince Edward Island, was a stark contrast to Baltimore's urban grit. The wind whipping off the Northumberland Strait carried the scent of salt and pine, a backdrop to his youthful earnestness. Clutching a worn copy of *Anne of Green Gables*, his Bucksport accent thick, he'd roamed red-dirt roads, convinced Anne's spirited muse lingered. Here, he'd embarked on six short films, grainy, silent odes to existential dread, often featuring inanimate objects. One notable, unfinished piece, "The Existential Tremor of a Lawn Gnome," saw its star mysteriously vanish, a testament to life's subtle absurdities.

Mrs. Eugenia Babic, the stern landlady of 1723 Ann Street, emerged with an air of refined skepticism. Lux, introducing himself as Lux Suede (his real name, Ezekiel Dyer, long abandoned), launched into a folksy murmur, a "real honah to meet ya."

Mrs. Babic's gaze, sharp as a freshly honed pencil, traveled from his floral kurtka and wool fedora to the Vibe's rear window, where Shoeshine's fuzzy head made a brief, suspicious appearance.

Lux, ever the smooth talker, delivered his well-rehearsed pitch for Shoeshine, highlighting their "bespoke, multi-layered compostin' system fo'... biological output. Entirely odorless, I ah-shuah ya. Artisanal, even. Excellent fo' yuh daisies."

Mrs. Babic's eyebrow arched, a monument to years of unyielding doubt. A faint, almost imperceptible tremor, akin to a smile, touched her lips. "Artisanal donkey droppings, Mr. Suede," she stated, devoid of any Maine lilt. "This *is* a first. One whiff, Mr. Suede. One *singular* whiff. And your donkey, your disco lights, and those... interesting spectacles will be out."

Undeterred, Lux, the quintessential showman, produced a small, polished topaz from his pocket.

"A toh-ken of my com-mit-ment, Miz Babic. From a fo'-got-n mine in... well, a place that val-yuhs crys-tuh-leen truth." He pressed the glowing stone into her hand. She scrutinized the topaz, then him, a flicker of ancient, knowing amusement in her eyes.

"Very well, Mr. Suede. Let's see your artisanal compost."

Another flashback transported Lux to the biting cold of Quebec City, where he shivered in a thin coat, engaged in fervent debates with Thierry, a gaunt poet whose words were delicate, frozen lacework. Their arguments over hand-set type versus offset printing for their ephemeral chapbooks, meant to revolutionize the underground literary scene, were fueled by the quiet presence of Thierry's grandmother. This woman, who knitted philosophical pronouncements into wool, offered steaming mugs of cider, her murmured

French, "Poverty is simply the silence between truths," a profound commentary on the beautiful futility of their artistic endeavors.

Settling into 1723 Ann Street was a gradual, almost geological shift. The Vibe became a temporary annex for zine prototypes. Inside, the bookcase found its place, Lux's literary giants now coexisting with Mrs. Babic's collection of Victorian porcelain cats. Shoeshine, surprisingly nimble, navigated the tight spaces, his hooves a soft patter on the worn floorboards. Shoeshine's own story, a quiet legend, spoke of rescue from a Czech farmstead, a lineage of "movement like the wind," and "friendship that never fades." He was found by Jan, a wandering musician, nursed back to health, and became a dancing companion, embodying joy in his "skokani" leaps. This deep connection had saved Lux from the depths of alcohol, forging an understanding rooted in shared stories and movement, a friendship that transcended words.

His first visitor was Eleanor Vance, an eighty-two-year-old neighbor whose vibrant energy belied her age. A former modern dancer, her movements still possessed effortless grace. She watched, amused, as Lux, in a moment of unbridled joy, launched into a crappy, creaky step dance, followed by a clumsy, yet heartfelt, tap dance that sounded more like a panicked centipede.

"Good heavens, dear," Eleanor chuckled, her voice like dry leaves skittering. "That's... *enthusiastic*."

"Yaaap," Lux panted, "It's ah-bowt ex-presh-un, ya know. The raw, un-vah-nished rhythm of the soul." He then produced a velvet pouch, spilling out a collection of small, polished topaz jewelry. "My collection. Each piece a cap-tuhed moh-ment of impulse buyin'. I mean, of Universal dawn."

Eleanor, her eyes twinkling, returned with a stack of old cookie boxes, revealing a jumble of glass beads, tarnished silver buttons, and sea-worn pebbles.

"My collection," she announced, "Trinkets. Each with a story. A memory. A silent scream."

They sat on the front steps, swapping treasures and tales. Eleanor recounted smoky jazz clubs and avant-garde performances, while Lux shared his deep-seated affection for big butts in corduroy and the philosophical implications of potato-scented fabric.

A final flashback transported them to the sultry heat of Buenos Aires, where the melancholic thrum of a bandoneón underscored Lux's time with Isabella. A dancer whose movements embodied pure sorrow, Isabella filled notebooks with beautiful, looping Persian longhand, crafting stories of exile and longing.

Her grandmother, whose face was a tapestry of forgotten revolutions, offered quiet wisdom: "Patience, my dear, is the slow, deliberate breath of the universe before it exhales a revolution."

Poverty, a constant companion, was a shared badge of honor among them, a testament to their unwavering artistic dedication.

As the Baltimore night deepened, Eleanor and Lux fell into a comfortable silence. In a spontaneous gesture, Lux leaned in, pressing his ear to Eleanor's chest. He heard the steady, rhythmic drum of her heartbeat, a profound sound, a truth more potent than any *Bavaria 8.6* or *Faxe 10*.

With the first tendrils of dawn, Lux began preparing his culinary offerings. The rhythmic clatter of his knife against the cutting board accompanied the chirping sparrows as he chopped onions, boiled peas, browned hamburger, and fried **home fries**. Squeaky cheese curds waited patiently, and a rich, dark brown gravy simmered on the stove.

He plated the Newfie Mess Poo-teen with a flourish—a hearty mound of fries, gravy, cheese curds, peas, onions, and hamburger, an unapologetic culinary statement. For himself, he poured a tall glass of peach juice, followed by a vibrant strawberry lemonade.

"This, Ms. Vance," Lux declared, pushing a steaming plate toward her, "is a taste of the Nawth Ah-lan-tic. A cul-chuh-al im-muh-shun." He then produced two dark bottles, their labels stark. "And them ah the ah-comp-uh-nee-in' li-bay-shuns. *Bavaria 8.6* and

Faxe 10. Truth **see**-rums, **they ah**. They strip ah-way **pre**tense, **reveal** the raw, un-vah-nished self."

He watched her with a mischievous glint in his purple spectacles.

Eleanor, her eyes twinkling, took a hearty bite of the poutine, then eyed the bottles.

"Truth serums, you say, Mr. Suede? At my age, I prefer my truths with a little less... *ferment*."

She took a long swig from the Bavaria 8.6, her expression shifting as if the very air around her was distorting. Lux, sipping his peach juice, smiled. The city was waking. Another day, another chapter for *Dead Duck Follies*.

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